


For sale: Historic bridge in Jackson Park

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Lolly Bowean



There's a historic bridge for sale in Jackson Park.

And it's not a con game.

The Columbia Bridge, widely known as the Clarence Darrow Memorial Bridge, is to be rebuilt in 2019.

But before the Chicago Department of Transportation can start construction on the new pedestrian bridge, the agency has to offer the old one to the public for possible reuse, said Mike Claffey, a spokesman for CDOT.

It's all part of the federal government's National Environment Policy Act and Section 106 process. But recently, the issue of the bridge being sold sparked some curiosity when an advertisement offering it for sale ran in a local newspaper.

"The Darrow Bridge is an important community landmark because (Clarence) Darrow was a fixture in our community," said Louise McCurry, president of the Jackson Park Advisory Council. When she learned of the ad, she immediately jumped into activist mode to spread information in her Hyde Park community about the sale.

"That bridge is the biggest link to Jackson Park, so it's a sacred landmark," she said. "So now to see it's being sold? Truly fascinating."

The Darrow Memorial Bridge, which has unique abutment walls and a storied history, is crumbling and unusable. It has been closed to cars since 2009 and to pedestrians since 2015.

The structure isn't actually going to be sold for a price, Claffey said. Rather, interested parties have to provide a proposal by 4 p.m. Feb. 28 describing how they can deconstruct and move it. They'll also have to explain how they plan to use the structure and offer a timeline for when they would do all the work. The proposal has to include supporting documentation, such as proof of financing to cover the full costs and a relocation plan that has been signed and sealed by a state licensed structural engineer.

If no one volunteers to move the structure, CDOT's contractors can remove it themselves, Claffey said in an email.

This is not the first time a bridge has been offered to the public. In August, the Illinois Department of Transportation went through a similar process to donate the historic Ford City bridge near Ford City Mall.

Still, the "sale" of Darrow bridge drew some attention, because Jackson Park is where the Obama Presidential Center is set to be constructed. The scenic park, with its sprawling lagoons, is the focus of a 10-year redevelopment plan led by the Chicago Park District.

Parts of the Darrow Memorial Bridge predate the World Columbian Exposition of 1893, said Tim Samuelson, a cultural historian with the city of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs. The original bridge was designed and constructed in 1880 by architects Daniel Hudson Burnham and John Wellborn Root. Then Frederick Law Olmsted retained the structure for his design for the Fair.

"Standing on that bridge and looking north is the most beautiful, exquisite view of the city," Samuelson said.

The bridge is constructed mainly of stone and is 56 feet long and 56 feet wide, documents show. It spans a narrow portion of a lagoon in Jackson Park and is tucked behind the Museum of Science and Industry. The old bridge carried cars between a parking lot and roadway. But the new bridge will be only for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The bridge was renamed for famous Chicago attorney Clarence Darrow, who died in 1938, Samuelson said. When he was alive, Darrow could see the bridge from his home on East 60th Street. And he was known to stand on the bridge and practice reciting his closing arguments.

When Darrow died, his ashes were scattered over the lagoon from the bridge.

Local lore has it that Darrow, who was an agnostic, said if there was an afterlife, he would return to the bridge every year on the anniversary of his death, Samuelson said.

And so nearly every spring, on March 13, people gather around the site to look for Darrow's ghost and place a wreath in the waterway.

Since 2015, CDOT has been involved in a process to design and build a replacement bridge.

In October, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning approved a \$5 million grant to pay for the bulk of the cost of the project.

For McCurry, the sale of the bridge seemed intriguing.

“The dilapidated condition of the bridge is such that it would have little use in another community,” she said. “The only logical response is to replace it. We are glad CDOT is replacing it with a bridge community members can effectively use.”

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